

by the past, if there is space for our own action—then we have to investigate more carefully the motive forces of this crisis, to find what solutions seem to be possible, which desirable, and which undesirable.

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An analysis of this crisis can be made only by an oversimplification.

This present crisis seems to end an epoch which has lasted for about three hundred years. Let us call it the epoch of enlightenment. Historians usually label a somewhat shorter period as the time of enlightenment; but the motives of the enlightenment of the eighteenth century were effective from the beginning of modern time and retain their force to this day.

Enlightenment was based on confidence in the autonomy of the human mind. This confidence was united with the hope of understanding nature by rational methods, of thereby eventually dominating it, and of ultimately regulating and planning all human relations reasonably. Who would not be delighted at such a prospect? Was not everything to be gained and nothing to be lost? The sacrifice which this plan demanded of man remained hidden for a long time.

The autonomy of human reason can be preserved only if there is undoubted security in our knowledge. Security of this kind we find in mathematics. In so far as mathematics is competent there is certainty of knowledge. The autonomy of reason needs knowledge of a mathematical kind. But mathematics can be applied only to a nature having a mechanistic structure. Consequently all phenomena have to be explained and understood as mechanism. But in a world based on mechanism there can be no becoming and no history in a true sense. Thus the claim of autonomy of reason forces certain metaphysical interpretations of nature and of all being. Only what is comprehensible by mathematical methods really exists for it.

At first enlightenment intended to dominate only external nature; but very soon man, in so far as he belongs to nature, was included as an object of these same tendencies. To fight misery, want, disease, and death was the first task; thus the seventeenth century brought modern medicine into existence. But after the bonds which both limited and formed men began to be broken, a tendency toward negative freedom gradually extended to all human relations. They all became, one after the other, targets of historical criticism and decomposition. Man wanted to be free. He wanted no other master than himself, either in nature or in a cosmic order.

Thus enlightenment unifies two motives which at the first glance seem to be contradictory to one another—that of exact rationalistic methods and that of individualism almost anarchistic and nihilistic.